

Not on my Roster

Alexander J. DeNoble
Kathleen A. DeNoble
Carol N. Fleres
Andrew A. McCabe

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Alexander J. DeNoble
Kathleen A. DeNoble
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Abstract

Special education programs for low achievers may not always be the right choice. Early identification and intervention could significantly reduce overdependence on special education. The authors reviewed pertinent literature related to the benefits of referral and placement in special education settings, and proposed strategies that would help low achieving, diverse students perform satisfactorily in the regular education environment. Meeting the challenge of addressing the academic and emotional needs of these students requires a real working partnership between regular education and special education. The keystone for completing the arch between the two must be provided by administrators who establish teacher training programs specifically designed to provide the knowledge, skills, and abilities to ensure program success

Keywords

referral, special education and general education partnership, reading failure, student placement

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This paper is about the children who are in special education programs that are not meeting their individual needs. For decades, educators have been failing to address key issues for success. School becomes so stressful for these children that they begin to mentally drop out by the late elementary years, and, sadly, sometimes even as early as first or second grade. By the time they reach high school they have become “unmotivated” and “unwilling” learners who physically drop out of school. At best they are soon forgotten. At worst, the school is happy to see them go.

The Washington Post rated most schools as failures with regard to their handling of these children (Kelly, 2001). One example that denotes failure on the part of educators is their need to use the special education program, especially self-contained classes, to remove “lower achiever” learners so they do not disrupt the learners who are perceived to be “good” learners. On the other hand, researchers from the Center on English Learning and Achievement at the State University of New York at Albany (1998) found strong evidence that early instruction with effective teachers can bring the scores of low achievers up beyond that of peers in more typical classrooms. Hence, if educators took this research finding and applied it in their teaching approach, then, perhaps, the need for special education or remedial programs wouldn’t be as rampant as it is today.

As reported in the Fordham Report (2006), the 2005 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) indicated that in reading, mathematics, and science low-income, African-American, and Hispanic students did very poorly on standardized tests. In fact, due to their test results, most states achieved a D ranking for these students, compared to a B ranking for white students. Teachers need to be aware of these results and

enhance their teaching methods and strategies so that all students can have their educational needs addressed in the classroom. In doing so, the need for referring low-income, African-American, and Hispanic students for special education services or remediation programs could be reduced. However, many general educators do not accept ownership for the challenge of educating children who require alternative learning methods and strategies. It may be due to the fact that some teachers do not vary their teaching styles, thereby causing many children to be placed in remedial or special education programs. It is also suspected that many general education teachers do not know how to vary their styles to meet the students’ needs.

One strategy teachers can implement in order to ensure that their teaching styles will not be a deterrent in classrooms that are more student-centered than teacher-centered is to review their individual style, that is, to know oneself. They should be able to reflect on their personal qualities and abilities so that they may be open to others. This does not occur with ease if teachers do not believe all students can learn. Learning takes place in a student-centered classroom when teachers permit students to develop their own learning styles. This can take place by incorporating Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences in the curriculum (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2004; Werts, Culatta, & Tompkins, 2007). His philosophy on teaching and learning allows the students to address the lessons in an atmosphere that is free of biases. Teachers should also implement Bloom’s Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain (Huitt, 2004) as a method to address the many academic stages that encompass a lesson. According to DeNoble (1998), Gregorc, Butler, and Dunn and Dunn are examples of outstanding researchers in the field of learning styles. If educators were

willing to do relevant research, and then put into action the aforementioned strategies, then, in all likelihood, the number of referrals for special education or remediation would be reduced.

Special education instructors and support personnel can assist their regular education colleagues by sharing pertinent pupil information, and collaborating on the implementation of proper strategies and lessons designed to meet the needs of pupils with educational disabilities. Some questions that general education teachers might ask themselves in preparing their lesson plans are as follows:

- Do I know the learning style of every student in this class?
- If not, how can I find out this information?
- How do my lesson plans reflect my knowledge of how my students learn?

Teachers who do accept the challenge of educating lower achievers are often frustrated due to their students' inability to immediately grasp learning concepts. In addition, these teachers often lack the essential resources and/or time necessary to address the educational needs of this population. Without a school-wide approach to positive behavior management, innovative instructional strategies, and other classroom supports, potentially first-rate teachers are often persuaded by their colleagues, and even by their leaders, into believing that such children are beyond the school's capacity to motivate them to learn.

Therefore, it was not surprising that Allington, McGill-Franzen, and Schick (1997) revealed that administrators from six school districts reported increasing transitional grade placements and increasing rates of identification of students with disabilities. When asked about the *rising* tide of referrals,

the administrators explained that remedies were outside the realm of the school, and they offered little in the way of leadership for changing the role of general education with respect to meeting the needs of children at risk. Thus, the system both protects and perpetuates itself.

Some strategies for enhancing students' motivation include the following:

- Praise and encourage students to succeed.
- No answer is a poor or incorrect answer.
- Show students respect.
- Hold high expectations for all students.
- Avoid negative comments and sarcasm.
- Offer extra help whenever needed.
- Take an interest in students' lives.
- Allow students to have input into the types of instructional materials used, methods of learning, and scheduling.
- Have a student-centered classroom.
- Allow alternative methods of instruction and learning through the use of technology, games, group work, and simulations.
- Allow various learning methods to be a part of the learning process such as cooperative learning and the use of various technologies into the classroom.
- Utilize various alternative means of assessment other than paper and pencil, such as: portfolio, oral presentation, and group presentation.

The Use of Derogatory Names

We have all known "educators" who develop derogatory names for the lower achievers. We've all heard them and don't need to see them in print. They are insulting

and unprofessional. Such statements generally go uncensored in the faculty room by colleagues and administrators. Some educators believe that all children would learn if only they were willing to take the opportunity that the school system afforded them. If only it were that simple to educate all children! The insensitivity and disinterest of such educators can only lead to failure for those lacking in academic abilities, or insight into the importance of education. Many of the students, who are referred to pejoratively, often make up the lower achiever population, are children of color, culturally/linguistically diverse, and from low socioeconomic status. They are the children whose families are relatively powerless in a system that is more politically motivated than it cares to admit. Payne (1998) suggested that this culture extends well beyond socioeconomic status. Children of color and children who come from the culture of poverty are seen as inferior learners, and the predictions of their uninformed caretakers at school serve as self-fulfilling prophecies of failure.

Reading and Failure

When young children fail at reading, they are on the path to failure across all grades. Poor culturally and linguistically diverse children come to school lacking critical skills necessary for learning how to read. These skills include adequate vocabulary, ability to hear and manipulate sounds in spoken language, and general information about the world. These children are on their way to special education before they set foot into school. Citing government statistics in an article in the January 14, 2001 issue of the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Bruce Fuller, professor of education and public policy at the University of California at Berkeley, revealed that children of the poor are nine months delayed

developmentally by the end of kindergarten. He added that poor children develop more complex language and math concepts at a slower rate than do those from middle class families. Since it doesn't take much time for there to be a significant deficiency in a pupil's ability to read, this deficit may be used as one of the criteria for eligibility for special education and related services.

To address these issues and work toward providing a level playing field, the following should be considered:

- Provide after school and/or summer programs at the K-3 level designed to bridge the development gap that poor children are experiencing, and, in doing so, also provide programs that will allow poor children to develop the knowledge, skills and abilities to work effectively with complex reading and math tasks on a level consistent with their chronological age.
- Peer tutoring, where students experiencing problems in math or reading are assigned to work with students who are achieving on a level lower than theirs might also be considered.

A slow academic start should not be the first step toward special education placement. Instead, it should lead to accelerated learning programs through the conduit of general education. 95% of students with severe reading problems can be helped to reach the national average. It therefore makes sense to try to accelerate their progress rather than to assume inherent disability ("Reading difficulties vs. learning disabilities", 1997). In a report developed at West Virginia University (2005), the following strategies for teaching students with learning disabilities were revealed:

- Announce readings as well as assignments well in advance.

- Introduce simulations to make abstract content more concrete.
- Offer to read written material aloud.
- Review relevant material, preview the material to be presented, present the new material, then summarize the material just presented.
- Encourage students to practice using technical words in exchanges among peers.
- Allow students to use a tape recorder.
- Spend more time on building background for the reading selections and creating a mental scheme for the organization of the text. (p. 18-19)

Another group of researchers estimated that the number of children who are known to be poor readers, those served by special education, compensatory education, and those not served, could be reduced by 70% with early identification and prevention (Lyon et al., 2001). This substantial reduction could be realized by

- Providing preschool assessment and reading programs in poor neighborhoods for children starting at age three.
- Providing year round enrichment programs for students identified at age three as being “high risk” for future reading problems.
- Providing assessment programs in grades K-8, at the beginning and end of each academic year, that would provide important reading and math skill information for identification and planning.

Reasons for Referral

Gottlieb and Weinberg (1999) compared students who were referred, or not referred, for special education, and found that children were referred based on poor academic pro-

gress. However, this is not the total picture. Children are also referred on the basis of how likely a child’s teacher is to make referrals to special education. Perceived misbehavior, family mobility, and tardiness are also critical indicators in the process. Add to this the fact that most of the referrals come from very few teachers; Gottlieb and Weinberg found that one-eighth of the teachers made two-thirds of all of the referrals. Their statistical evidence is consistent with the authors’ empirical findings through years of administration of special education programs. Indeed, chance placement in a typical class with a teacher who is, or is not, tolerant of a child’s performance and behavior determines, to a large extent, whether or not a child will be placed in special education. Children of similar academic and behavioral profiles to the ones referred often remain in typical classes, while those who are seen as misbehaving are referred to special education.

Michael Ladner, Policy Director for Children First America, testified on October 4, 2001 before the Congressional Committee on Education and the Workforce with regard to racial bias in special education placements (Ladner & Hammons, 2001). He noted that schools in which the majority of students and teachers are White place disproportionately high numbers of minority children into special education. Ladner further testified that his research showed that African-American students are placed into special education at a higher rate than any other racial group. His statistics showed that, in predominantly White districts (60% White or more), almost one in four African-American students were placed in special education. It is, therefore, not surprising that it was reported in the executive summary of a Harvard University Conference on Minority Issues in Special Education (Lee & Burkham, 2001) that, using

statistics from 1997, African-American children were almost three times more likely to be labeled “mentally retarded” as compared to Whites and other minorities. In fact, Ladner and Hammons concluded that

We simply have no way to know what the special education rate “should be” in any district or any state. What we do know is this: Race plays a powerful role in the placement of children in special education.... The results demonstrate conclusively that school districts do not make special education placements in a color-blind fashion. (p.108)

Additionally, according to Chamberlain (2005), the two basic educational reasons for the overrepresentation in special education of culturally and linguistically diverse students are as follows:

1. General education teachers lack the ability to discern between underachievement due to disability (e.g., information processing deficits seen with learning disability (LD) and underachievement due to other reasons (e.g., learning English as a second language culture clashes that lead to low expectations by teachers.)
2. Educational diagnosticians are unable to make the same distinction within the context of comprehensive assessment.

(p.297)

Teachers can motivate students by implementing Blair's (2003) seven principles of instruction:

1. Learn about and show sensitivity to the cultural backgrounds of their students.
2. Provide academic, interactive instruction based on student backgrounds and needs.
3. Cultivate student feelings and encourage parent involvement.

4. Believe in their abilities to make a difference and convince their students that they will learn.
5. Maximize the use of classroom time to teach students what they need to know.
6. Utilize management and grouping plans that reflect students' learning styles.
7. Use a variety of assessment techniques, especially performance-based measures that are sensitive to students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

(p.9)

Furthermore, Blair suggested that in order for teachers to fully understand culturally and linguistically diverse students' academic abilities the following assessment measurements would be helpful:

- Classroom observation
- Observation checklists
- Projects
- Logs and journals
- Cooperative works
- Self-assessment
- Interest inventories
- Daily assignments
- Anecdotal records
- Criterion-referenced tests
- Norm-referenced tests
- Graded paragraph inventories
- Student portfolios
- Performance samples (p. 66)

Intelligence testing is often interpreted inappropriately in a way that is not in the interest of culturally diverse students (Lyon et al., 2001), that is, a handful of teachers make the majority of referrals in a given school (Gottlieb & Weinberg, 1999). The procedures for placement into special education lack clarity and objectivity (Lyon et al.), and the percentage of students classified varies from district to district revealing the lack of objectiv-

ity involved in the process (Ladner & Hammons, 2001).

It is clear that almost any child has the potential for placement in special education. Those whose race or culture differs from that of the faculty are those most likely to be seen as deviant in some way or lacking in ability. One would be hard pressed not to realize that something, other than academic abilities, is also affecting placement into special education.

Thus, in addition to the inability to meet appropriate grade level challenges, an effective teacher must also be aware that

- Understanding cultural issues which can affect academic and behavioral patterns is critical, especially in working with poor children.
- Especially in working with boys, a working knowledge of ADD and ADHD in terms of identification and remediation procedures is very important. The boy to girl ratio for ADD and ADHD is 4 or 5 to 1.
- Skill and performance deficits often translate into behavioral issues. Knowing how to identify and remediate these deficits is critical for both regular and special education teachers.

Assessment and Placement

Gottlieb (2001) reviewed the scores of special education students for the year 2000 on statewide tests for the 8th grade in English/Language Arts and Mathematics in New York State. He found a marked difference in the scores between districts along socioeconomic lines. Children enrolled in special education programs in the districts with the greatest socioeconomic need averaged 3.7% passing rate for English/ Language Arts, while those in the lowest need (the wealthier) districts averaged a much higher 22.7% rate for passing. In the

case of mathematics, the picture was similar: a passing rate of 3.5% where the socioeconomic need is greatest and a much higher 27.5% rate of passing where socioeconomic need is lowest. The U.S. Department of Education in its 2002 report on the National Assessment of Educational Progress revealed that students in high poverty public schools achieved at a lower rate in 4th grade mathematics than students in the wealthier public schools.

In the year 2000, the National Assessment of Educational Programs (U.S. Department of Education) tested 8,000 fourth graders across the United States in reading and reported in *The Nation's Report Card* that 60% of poor children (those receiving Title I funds) were unable to understand what they read. Meanwhile, the high achieving students were achieving at even higher levels than when previously tested, while the scores of low achieving students' scores were decreasing. Unfortunately, according to the U.S. Department of Education's report for the year 2002, the gap in achievement between low socioeconomic children and their more affluent peers is widening. In the 1970's and mid 80's the gap in K-12 reading and mathematics achievement between African-American and White students was narrowing. Since then the gap has remained the same or widened.

Some suggestions for bridging the gap are noted earlier and relate to early identification and intervention programs, as well as pre- and post-testing for lower socioeconomic students in reading and math in grades K-8. These strategies provide sound training programs for teachers that will give them the knowledge and skills needed to identify and remediate academic problems. As suggested by Ferguson in the Harvard Education Letter (2006), teachers and students need to take a look at what students are

not achieving and why. This team approach would allow them to develop methods that are conducive to the students' learning styles and abilities so that they could achieve the goals of the curriculum. Although this process could be a challenge to the general lifestyle of the classroom environment, it is a means to developing teacher-student relationships that promote student achievement.

Relationships

As the culture of the staff and the child's culture clash, the fragile self-esteem of the young child can be eroded. When social interaction is limited by misunderstandings, which may or may not go unspoken, but which are keenly felt, learning is compromised. Learning flourishes in communities, which facilitate growth through meaningful experiences and healthy discourse.

Payne (1998) suggested that the key to the achievement of poor children is in relationships. Relationship-making is especially important to people whose beliefs and values align with the culture of poverty, so it is essential in reaching the children and their families. Lee and Burkham (2001) found that the structure and organization of the high school influences students when they make the decision to drop out of school. Their most significant finding was that students who perceive positive relationships with their teachers are less likely to drop out of high school, despite the student's background or the demographics of the school. Positive school relationships, explicit teaching of social behaviors, and formal language can allow students who are poor to compete with students who are economically privileged on equal footing.

Conclusions

There is no substitute for an effective teacher, one who engages in learning about

learning and thereby implements ways to accelerate the learning process for those who come to school without the experiential background, knowledge, and skills needed to succeed. Continuous and expansive professional and staff development in line with teacher interests and needs are not luxuries, but rather the bread of life for schools and for all of the children they serve. The implementation of programs to address the unresolved issues of learning challenged students both in affluent and lower socioeconomic districts has the power to bring about miraculous and much needed change.

All general educators must take greater responsibility for the children who find it difficult to learn. There are general educators who have taken the lead, and they should be applauded. Carter (1999) interviewed one hundred principals in effective high poverty schools with predominantly African-American and Hispanic youths, and concluded that achievement was the key to avoiding the discipline problems that we hear about all too often. He found that achievement, taken together with self-control, self-reliance, and self-discipline, were powerful factors in the students' successes. Nonetheless, there remain too many teachers and administrators, like the administrators interviewed by Allington, McGill-Franzen and Schick (1997), who blame the children, their parents, and other agencies for the ills of the school.

There can be no place for "finger pointing" or self depreciation. Leadership includes creating a vision of excellence for all children. Clearly, there is a conflict between the culture of many schools and the culture of students who appear differently in terms of race and socioeconomic status. This conflict is at the heart of the low achievement of African-American, Native American, and Hispanic children in school, and their over-

representation in special education and/or remedial programs.

Schools need to create communities of learners that do not exclude, but welcome all children. Staff should be trained in what Payne (1998) called the “hidden rules” of the culture of poverty, so they understand the values and beliefs that drive feelings and behavior. Students will thrive in schools that have an environment which facilitates teaching that builds upon and shows respect for individual talents. In addition, teachers must help students to develop healthy self confidence by encouraging independent thinking.

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About the authors:

Alexander J. DeNoble is the Interim Principal of A. Harry Moore School for pupils with multiple disabilities at New Jersey City University.

Kathleen A. DeNoble is an adjunct professor of Special Education and Educational Leadership at New Jersey City University.

Carol N. Fleres is Chair of the Department of Special Education at New Jersey City University.

Andrew A. McCabe is an associate professor of Special Education at New Jersey City University.